

'Hot 100' News Writing Tips

(Compiled by Sheryl Swingley)

LEAD

1. Keep leads short. Those with 35 words or less are preferred.
2. Leads limited to one or two sentences are preferred.
3. Avoid starting leads with "when" or "where" unless the time or place is unusual. Most leads start with "who" or "what."
4. Avoid beginning leads with "there" or "this."
5. In leads about future events, the time, day (date) and place usually go at the end of the paragraph.
6. In leads about past events, the day (date) of the event usually appears before or after the verb. Sometimes the day (date) comes at the end of the first sentence or the paragraph if it is a one-sentence lead.
7. Use quote and question leads sparingly.
8. The first five to "what happened" makes a better story than the fact it did.

BODY

9. Keep paragraphs short. Those limited to 60 words or less or no longer than 10 typeset lines are preferred.
10. Paragraphs limited to one to three sentences are preferred.
11. Each paragraph should contain only one idea.
12. Remember short paragraphs encourage readers to continue reading.

EDITING

13. Eliminate the word "that" whenever possible.
14. For past events, report it happened "Friday," NOT "last Friday." Eliminate the word "last." For future events, report it will happen "Monday," NOT "next Monday." Eliminate the word "next."
15. Eliminate the "be" verb. Write "she will resign" instead of "she will be resigning." Write in future tense (will) instead of future progressive tense (will be "ing").
16. Eliminate words such as "when asked" and "concluded." These are weak transitions. Just report what was said.

17. A long title should follow the name. A title that follows the name should be lowercased and set off in commas. Shorter titles that precede names should be capitalized.

18. Avoid the contractions of he'd and they'd. "He'd" can mean both "he had" and "he would," and "they'd" can mean both "they had" and "they would."

19. Always double-check the spelling of names.

20. Make sure numbers match the items listed.

21. Make sure "only" is placed properly in a sentence. The location of "only" can change the meaning of a sentence.

22. Write. Rewrite. Revise. Rewrite. Revise. Edit. Revise. Edit. Edit. The first version of a story is NOT good enough to go into print. Someone once said THERE IS NO GREAT WRITING, ONLY GREAT REWRITING.

23. Read the story out loud to catch awkward sentence constructions.

GRAMMAR

24. If "none" means "no one" or "not one," use a singular verb. Consult the AP Stylebook or Grammar for Journalists for more information. Example: None was found guilty.

25. When you use a pronoun to refer to a team or a group, the proper pronoun to use is "its," NOT they. Example: The team wants to improve its record.

26. Make sure verbs or other phrases are "parallel" or the same in structure when they appear in stories or list. Examples: He likes gardening, fishing and hunting. The fire killed at least 12 persons, injured 60 more and forced scores of residents to leap from windows.

27. Use THIRD PERSON (she, he, it, its, her, hers, him, his, they, them, their, theirs) in news stories. Only on rare occasions do you use first person (I, mine, we, our, ours) or second person (you, your, yours) in news stories.

28. When "either ... or" and "neither ... nor" are used, the verb agrees in person with the nearer subject. Examples: Neither the coach nor the players are to blame. Neither the players nor the coach is to blame.

29. Use active voice vs. passive voice. The passive voice is formed by using some form of the verb "be" with the past participle of an action verb: is shot, was shot, has been shot, had been shot, may be shot, will be shot. The word "by" may also signal the sentence is written in passive voice. Rewrite sentences to eliminate the word "by." Example: Passive voice ; The city was ordered by the judge to make the payment. Active voice ; The judge ordered the city to make the payment.

MISCELLANEOUS

30. When something isn't clear, make a drawing of it. Putting it on paper can clarify the situation.

31. WHEN IN DOUBT, LEAVE IT OUT. This has to do with questionable information that may be libelous, incomplete information and information the writer does not have a clear understanding of.

NONSEXIST, NONAGEIST, NONDISCRIMINATORY COMMUNICATION

32. Avoid words that reinforce ageist, racial and ethnic stereotypes.

33. Avoid racial identification except when it's essential to communication.

34. Substitute asexual words for "man" words or sexist words.

NO	YES
mankind	people, humanity, human beings, human race
man-made	synthetic, artificial, manufactured, of human origin
manpower	workers, work force, staff, personnel
man-hours	work hours
man-sized	husky, sizable, large, requiring exceptional ability
founding fathers	pioneers, colonists, patriots, forebears
gentleman's agreement	informational agreement or contract
for the man on the way up	for the person or executive on his or her way up
for the lady of the house	for the homemaker or consumer or head of the household
anchorman	anchor
advertising man	advertising professional or practitioner
chairman	chairperson
cleaning woman	housekeeper, custodian
Englishmen	the English
fireman	firefighter
foreman	supervisor
a man who	someone who
man the exhibit	run the exhibit, staff the exhibit
man of letters	writer
newsman	reporter
postman	letter carrier
policeman	police officer
salesman	salesperson
stewardess	flight attendant
self-made man	self-made person
weatherman	meteorologist
workman	worker
the girls (for women over 18)	the women
the little lady, the better half	wife
girl Friday	secretary, assistant, right hand
libber or women's lib	feminist, liberationist, women's movement

the ladies and the men

man and wife

you and your wife

coed (for female students at a
coeducational school)

ladylike

housewife

career girl or career woman

the women and the men, the ladies and
the gentlemen, the girls and the boys
(Note the parallelism in structures.)

husband and wife

you and your spouse

student

well-mannered

homemaker (for a person who manages a
home); in an economic sense, consumer,
customer or shopper

refer to the woman's profession or
vocation ; Professor Jane Jones;
Kathy Smith, welder

35. Separate the person from the handicap. For more information, go to
www.easter.seals.org/resources/press/tips.asp.

NO

Mary, an epileptic, had no trouble
doing her job.

The handicapped parents met to
exchange ideas.

The deaf accountant spotted the error.

YES

Mary, who had epilepsy, had no trouble
doing her job.

The parents, each with some handicap,
met to exchange ideas.

The accountant spotted the error.

36. Be respectful of persons with handicaps. For more information, go to
www.easter.seals.org/resources/press/tips.asp

NO

crippled

deaf and dumb, deaf mute

crazy, insane, dull, half-witted, retarded

fits, spells

YES

impaired, limited, disabled or be specific -
paraplegic

deaf, hearing and/or speech impaired

mentally ill, developmentally
disadvantaged, disabled or limited, or
be specific - emotionally disturbed,
slow learner

seizures, epilepsy

37. Use "he or she" or "she or he" for "he." If using "he or she" or "him or her" becomes cumbersome, consider using a plural pronoun ; "they," "them," "their" or "theirs." Plural pronouns, however, are weaker than singular ones.

ORGANIZATION

38. Make sure information introduced or outlined in the lead is covered in the same order in the body of the story.

39. Avoid introducing new information at the end of a story. All aspects of a story should usually be introduced or outlined in the first few paragraphs.

40. Transitions are necessary to show the reader that the writer has a sense of direction. A word, phrase, sentence or paragraph can move the reader from one thought to another.

PARTS OF SPEECH

41. Avoid using "like" for "as." "Like" is a preposition and takes a noun or pronoun object. "As" is a subordinate conjunction that introduces dependent clauses. Examples: It tastes like a peach. The one-time millionaire now works from dawn to dusk, as he did in his youth.

42. Most adverbs are unnecessary. Redundant adverbs weaken strong verbs. Instead of "tightly clenched teeth," write "clenched teeth." Instead of "the radio blared loudly," write "the radio blared."

43. Most adjectives are unnecessary. The concept is oftentimes already in the noun. Use adjectives sparingly.

44. Choose verbs that suggest what they mean. "Active" verbs add pace, clarity and vigor to writing. Verbs are a writer's most important tools. Avoid "be" verbs.

PUNCTUATION

45. Use a comma with "according to." Example: ... , according to the news release. According to John Jones,

46. There is no comma between time, date and place. Example: The accident occurred at 4:32 a.m. Monday one-half block north of Central Dairy on Third Street South.

47. When in doubt about the use of a comma, leave it out.

48. Avoid comma splices and comma blunders. If a comma is placed between the subject (noun) and predicate (verb), it's called a "comma splice." Example: The Fountain of Youth, is not in Florida. (The comma is NOT needed.) If two independent clauses are joined by a comma, this is a "comma blunder" or "comma fault." Example: The Fountain of Youth is not in Florida, it's in Russia. (This is known as a run-on sentence. A period or a semicolon should replace the comma. If a period is used, the "i" on "it's" also needs to be capitalized.)

49. A comma should precede "such as," "especially" and "including" when these words introduce examples. Examples: The advertised price of the tour does not cover some personal expenses, such as laundry, entertainment and tips. He likes fruit, especially oranges. In newswriting, students study various

approaches to writing, including the inverted pyramid, chronological, narrative, personalized and first-person. When "such as" is used with a restrictive application, the comma is omitted. Example: Magazines such as these should be thrown in the trash.

50. Quotation marks go outside commas (,) and periods (.). They go inside semicolons (;) and colons (:).

51. In a series, a comma is NOT needed before the "and." Example: red, white and blue.

52. The dash is a long mark (-- or ;). There should be a space before and after the dash. The dash should be used before words and sentences run as lists.

53. The hyphen is a short mark (-) and is used to divide words or to link hyphenated adjectives. Don't hyphenate adverbs ending in "ly" with adjectives. Write "frequently misused words," NOT "frequently-misused words."

54. Use an exclamation point in only the rarest of situations and only after brief interjections. Exclamation points are "graphic tantrums" and sometimes demonstrate a lack of control on the writer's part. The order of the words in a sentence should be arranged in such a way that they make the desired impression. Let the reader decide if the content is humorous or exciting on his or her own.

QUOTES AND ATTRIBUTION

55. Use attribution only once per paragraph.

56. Attribution is needed when policy change statements are made, when opinions are expressed or when "professional" opinions from physicians, scientists, engineers and others are used. Attribution is also needed with direct quotations and indirect quotations (paraphrased information).

57. Attribution is NOT needed when facts are commonplace and not subject to dispute or when they are accepted and historically true.

58. Attribution is usually noun + verb. Example: Jones said. It may be verb + noun when the source's title follows his or her name. Example: "...," said John Jones, chairman of the department of English.

59. Attribution should be placed at the end of the first sentence when the quote is made up of two or more sentences.

60. When one quote follows another but the second one is from a different source, attribution for the second quote should be placed at the beginning of it. This helps the reader know immediately that a different person is speaking.

61. "Said" is the best word for attribution. Other words can be used, but they should accurately represent how something is said.

62. Use past tense verbs (said vs. says) for attribution in news stories.

63. Let quotes begin the paragraph. Show them off. Quote marks attract the reader's eye. Use them to encourage the reader to continue reading.

64. Avoid the use of partial quotes. Quote or paraphrase material. Don't mix the two.

65. Each time a different source is cited, start a new paragraph.

SENTENCE STRUCTURE

66. Avoid using the same word twice in a sentence.

67. The optimum number of words to use in a sentence is 14 to 16. The average reader cannot comprehend a sentence with more than 40 words.

68. When writing becomes cumbersome, turn one long sentence into two or three shorter ones.

69. If a long sentence must be used, place a short sentence before and after it.

70. Don't have more than three consecutive prepositional phrases in a sentence. Prepositional phrases start with about, above, against, at, between, by, down, during, for, from, in, like, on, over, through, to, toward, under, up, until, upon, with ...

71. Count the words in a story's sentences. Sentence length should vary. Stories become dull when sentences are all the same length.

72. Don't start or end a sentence with "however." Start the sentence and then work "however" into it as soon as possible. This word is intended to cause an interruption in thought.

SPELLING

73. Use "Spell Check" on the computer.

74. Consult a dictionary. (Webster New World Dictionary is the preferred reference.)

75. Ask for help. Public library information desk personnel can be resourceful and helpful. Don't call university libraries for assistance.

STYLE

76. Consult the AP Stylebook and Libel Manual.

77. If the answer cannot be found in the AP Stylebook, consult a dictionary or a grammar book.

78. The order for writing when and where is time, day (date) and place.

79. Use the day of the week for six days before or after a specific day.

80. Use the date when it is seven or more days before or after a specific day.

81. On first reference, identify a person by his or her first and last names. On second reference, refer to the person by his or her last name only. On second and all other references, you don't need Miss, Mrs., Ms. or Mr. unless it's an obituary.

VOCABULARY

82. Use simple words. Never send the reader to the dictionary. Odds are the reader won't bother looking up the definition.

83. Words such as "thing" and "a lot" annoy some readers, bosses and executives. Avoid using them. (Note the correct spelling of "a lot.")

84. Be careful how the word "held" is used. Make sure the object can be "held" physically. Example: Weak ; The meeting will be held at noon Monday in Anthony Administration Building, Room 125. Better ; The meeting will be at noon Monday in ...

85. Avoid using words that qualify how someone feels, thinks or sees. "Little qualifiers" include the following: a bit, a little, sort of, kind of, rather, around, quite, very, pretty, much, in a very real sense, somewhat.

86. Avoid technical jargon unless 95 percent or more of the readers will understand it. If technical jargon is used and it won't be understood by the majority of readers, be sure to explain each term used.

87. Learn the difference between "affect" (usually a verb) and "effect" (usually a noun). Consult the AP Stylebook or a dictionary for more information.

88. Never say "yesterday" or "tomorrow." These words are confusing to readers. Use the day of the week. "Today" may be used.

89. Know the difference between its (no apostrophe for possessive pronoun) and it's (the contraction for it is). Examples: The dog has a thorn in its (possessive pronoun) paw. It's (contraction) time to go.

90. Know when to use "their" (possessive pronoun), "there" (adverb) and "they're" (the contraction for they are). Examples: It is their (possessive pronoun) project. The project is over there (adverb). They're (contraction) working together on the project.

91. Know the difference between whose (possessive pronoun) and who's (the contraction for who is). Examples: Whose (possessive pronoun) coat is this? Who's (contraction) going on the trip?

92. Know when to use "to" (preposition), "too" (adverb) and "two" (adjective). Examples: The advertising group is going to (preposition) Indianapolis. The public relations group wants to go, too (adverb). Some members are not going on the trip because it will take too (adverb) much time from their schedules. The two (adjective) groups will go to Indianapolis.

93. A person dies "unexpectedly," "apparently of a heart attack," "after a brief illness," "after a long illness," "of injuries suffered or sustained," "following or after an operation" or "of a disease."

94. In connection with suicides, it is best to say the person was "found dead" or "fell or plunged to his or her death" until the coroner completes his or her investigation. When suicide is reported, used died by suicide vs. committed suicide. For more guidelines on reporting and writing about suicide, go to www.suicidology.org/media/7.html.

95. In connection with arrests, write "arrested in connection with," "sought in connection with," "charged with" or "arrested on charges of." If a confession is involved but the confession has not been admitted as evidence in court, report only that the prisoner "has made a statement."

96. Injuries are "suffered or sustained," NOT received.

97. With murder, arrests are made "in connection with the death of." It should not be reported that a victim was murdered until someone is convicted of the crime. In obituaries, it may be said the victim was "killed" or "slain."

98. Remember two objects must be moving to "collide." If a vehicle runs into a parked one or an object, say the vehicle "struck" the stationary one.

99. Sometimes information cannot be verified. If doubt exists regarding a person's name, report the person "was listed by police as John Smith" or he "gave his name as John Smith." If a person is dead or unconscious and there is no identification, he or she is "unidentified," NOT unnamed. If there are questions about where a person lives, report "address not given" or "address unknown."

100. With fires, a building is "destroyed," NOT completely destroyed. Buildings also are damaged "lightly," "moderately" or "heavily." A fire may "gut" or "destroy" the interior of a building. To raze a building is to level it to the ground.